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SENATE COMMITTEE ON POST AUDIT AND OVERSIGHT

Room 314, State House Boston, MA 02133

Telephone 722-1420

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The Mid-Cape Highway: Present Status And Future Plans

When construction began in the 1950's it was intended that Route 6 on the Cape would be a four lane highway extending from the Sagamore Bridge to the rotary in the Town of Orleans. Route 134 in Dennis was the furthest that the lane expansion proceeded, however, before construction ceased. Since then, the 13 mile stretch of Route 6 that remains a two lane road has been written about, studied, decried, debated, and labeled one of the worst highways in the country for traffic accidents and fatalities.

Prompted by reports of fatalities on that stretch of road, the Senate Post Audit and Oversight Committee in 1986 reviewed the status of that part of Route 6 which remains two lanes. And again in 1988, prompted this time by an oil tanker tip-over which tied up traffic and posed environmental threats, the Committee renewed its interest in the present status and future plans for the road.

In 1974, the Department of Public Works began preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement as the first step toward completing construction of four lanes for the full length of Route 6. Local opposition to the project, based on concerns over increased traffic and possible environmental harm, particularly to local water supplies, side-tracked that 1974 effort. By the early 1980's, population and traffic had increased substantially in the area, in spite of the highway's two lane status, to the point that a Route 6 Task Force was formed. Working under the auspices of the Cape Cod Planning and Economic Development Commission, that task force studied alternatives to full expansion of Route 6 and issued a report in October, 1986. That report, "Alternatives Recommended for Analysis in the Environmental Impact Statement on U.S. Route 6 on Cape Cod between Dennis and Orleans," offered recommendations for both short and long term actions to alleviate congestion and safety problems on the road. Among the short term actions recommended were the pruning of trees to increase vision along the road, better

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signage to alert drivers sooner of the road change from two lanes to one lane in each travel direction, and modification of passing zones. Those recommendations were implemented with an apparent result of decreasing substantially both accident and fatality rates on the road. Other ameliorative steps taken included:

- addition of centerline reflectors for safer night driving;
- installation of an additional arrowboard at the Dennis lane transition;
- increased police presence;
- installation of safer guardrails; and
- improvements to the road shoulder and the catch basins.

However, concerns over safety and emergency vehicle access remain. According to the Route 6 Task Force, the highway will be at "full" capacity, based on current Cape Cod growth rates, by 1991, a full five to ten years before any further road expansion project could be completed. Emergency access to the road by police, fire and other emergency vehicles is limited when traffic is backed up, a common occurrence. This is particularly worrisome when access is needed to hospitals west of the two lane stretch. And, the Town of Brewster, which has four miles of Route 6 running through it, is without any direct access to the road from within the Town, a situation which goes unresolved because of disputes over who should pay for designing and building an emergency access road to the highway.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Works believes that some reconfiguration of Route 6 must occur ultimately and it has reinstated an Environmental Impact Statement for Route 6 to "go" status. However, four other major highway projects are on the list ahead of Route 6, and the Environmental Impact Statement itself could take another two to three years for completion. Design of any project requires another three years, and construction would take at least two years. That means that no permanent or substantial change is likely for that highway for at least eight, and more likely ten, years.

Reportedly, there has been no fatality on the road since Christmas Eve of 1985 and accidents have dropped by one-third. The recent oil tanker spill was inconveniencing, but permanent or substantial environmental damage was avoided. The concern, however, is that Route 6 will remain on low priority status for the very fact that fatalities have thus far been avoided and disaster averted. But, given the time required for completion of any major improvement to the road, luck may be pushed, and one or more catastrophic-like events may yet occur, particularly as both population and traffic in the Cape area increase.

The Committee intends to continue its oversight and monitoring of the situation to assure that attention to the project is not diverted and that further delays are avoided.

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